

SOCIETY OF HELPERS

VOICES of Hope



Young Adults Journey With God & Faith

Vol XIII Issue I

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Letter from the Editorial Team



The last issue of *Voices of Hope* focused on the existence and influence of prophets in our lives—people who inspire us and give us hope and direction, especially during the time of a continuing pandemic. The reflection on prophets led me to reflect on those who were listening to their teachings, and more importantly, those who weren't, specifically young people. I am twenty-seven years old. I am a part of a generation where seemingly everyone in my family and community who is my age or younger has a vastly different perspective on faith and religion than their elders. As I prepare to bring a new generation into the world with the birth of my son in May, God willing, I wonder how far this ebb away from traditional, organized religion will go and what has caused it? What is influencing young people and how is their faith being affected?

According to the Pew Research Center, more than 29% of U.S. adults have said that they have no religious affiliation, up 6 percentage points since the last poll before the pandemic, with an even higher percentage reporting they do not pray or attend religious services. Seemingly, more and more young people—teenagers and young adults, are opting out of organized religion in favor of a non-structured, loosely structured, or non-existent practice of faith.

Technology is one potential reason for this change. As technology increases, young adults spend more time engaging with it. Many religious leaders might find that the more traditional ways of outreach and participation in faith services are no longer as effective with a younger population. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, etc. aren't usually considered faith tools or religious outreach sources, when they could actually be quite effective in reaching those in my age group.

Another potential reason is messaging and content: historically, many sermons and formal teachings of faith have had the effect of being rigid and alienating to some. Those who identify with the LGBTQ+ community and women's rights activists come to mind. Many young adults are simply unwilling to participate in activities or organizations that preach a message that negatively targets members for things beyond their control or things they deem unfair. They are less tolerant of rigid rules and more questioning than previous generations.

For this issue of *Voices*, the editorial team reached out to young people to explore their current relationship with their faith: what role has faith played in their lives thus far; how has their faith been challenged or not challenged; and who has inspired them. From the thought-provoking articles that we collected, it is clear that despite the challenges of the current day, young people still yearn for the community and purpose found in a faith-filled life, even if that life might not look exactly as it has in the past. We hope that this issue sheds light on the experiences young people have in the context of their faith and allows us as a readership community to reflect on what faith-based organizations can do to better improve communication, connection, and content with young people as we move forward into an ever-changing world.

Kyrsten Hoffman

Fearless in Faith | By James Holzhauer-Chuckas, ObSB



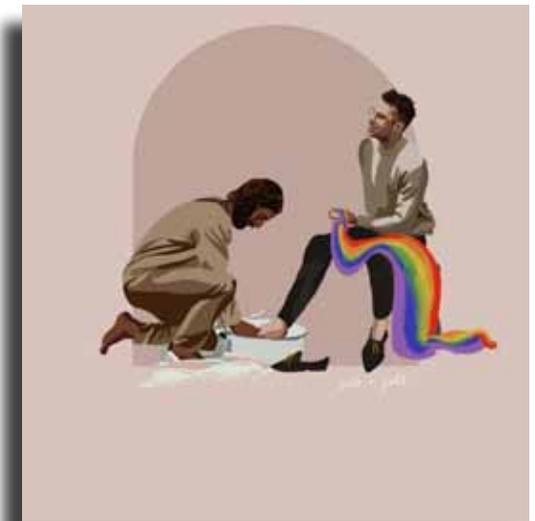
"God became one of us so that we may become more like God." Growing up, this quote from St. Athanasius of Alexandria always

pointed me to ways of finding hope, especially in times when there was plenty of reason to lose hope. Living an authentic Catholic faith hasn't always been rainbows and butterflies, but it's not always supposed to be. The Apostle Peter, Jesus' right hand, was the best among the Apostles and models for us that, even in moments when we doubt or even deny Jesus, we can always turn back and follow Jesus again. Sometimes, this can be scary. Life can give us plenty of reasons to find an easier way than faith to guide us, but it is our hope that leads us to the love of Christ and how that love becomes alive in our daily decisions.

The love of God has had many faces on my journey. Starting with my moms, who embody God for me, adopted me, chose me, just as God chose me. The lessons they taught me, the way they put forward their faith as a guide in their actions was something that rooted faith in me. It wasn't always through going to church, but the constant return to the Gospel that always gave me such hope. As I got older and my family started to fall away from the

church for very just reasons, specifically parish life, I had fears that I would lose my way, but I kept my hope in many things and, as my interest in studying theology grew, I turned to the Word of God. A fun fact: the phrase, "Do not be afraid" is written in the Bible 365 times. For me, especially after discovering this, it became a daily reminder from God to live fearlessly and not just to trust in God's mysterious ways, but to be aware and be in touch through discernment. That was a daily choice, and it still is. Every day, I wake up and have hope in God through my relationships with family and friends.

My relationship with the Church has been complicated. Due to my strong advocacy for the LGBTQ+ community, women's rights and ordination, and tensions with the idea of





not only existing within but serving in a patriarchal hierarchy that has often resulted in alienating those whom I love, I often found myself clashing with my peers, teachers, clergy, and others who hold stronger to the traditions of the Roman Catholic Church without any considerations for reform. I also found in the Church, however, many friends, mentors, clergy, and, eventually, my religious community (The Order of St. Benedict), who had common elements on their journey that allowed for mutual accompaniment. In the same vein, I also learned the importance of the universal call to accompaniment of my sisters, brothers, and siblings in Christ who don't share my views and that, though our approaches may be different, we are to work together for the common good.

My childhood parish starts its mission statement with "All are welcome." In the Body of Christ, we are all welcome because we, though different, form one body together. This is something I have held onto and will never let go of. That welcoming, that togetherness in Christ, is faith because though we do not all worship the same, have the same theological approach, or follow the same vocational calling, we are all bound to each other by the love of Christ, the same love that we are supposed to embody for others so that they, too, might have hope in a world that severely needs something to believe in, something to place our hope in. Every day, I strive to give hope to anyone whose path I cross.

James Holzhauer-Chuckas, ObSB is an Oblate of the Benedictine Order and is the Senior Director of United Catholic Youth Ministries, the regional ministry serving youth and young adults in the Evanston region of the Archdiocese of Chicago. James lives in Evanston with his partner, Denisse.



Welcomed, Seen, Valued: Creating a Home for LGBTQ+ People

By Andrea Wise



I was 19, sitting on the grassy field next to the beautiful beaming St. Ignatius Church. I was scheduled to meet the youth group leader of a Christian group on campus. I liked attending the group with my friends – the music was beautiful and the leader seemed charismatic and funny. He always told us, "I'm here for you! I want to connect with you and support you."

I was nervous for the conversation, but I was always a little nervous at that time. I had recently developed feelings for a female friend of mine, and I didn't have many people to talk to about it. Though I do not remember any explicit teachings that stated it was wrong to be gay when I was growing up and attending Catholic school, I had absorbed enough implicit information to know it was not welcome.

As I sat with the youth leader, I told him I had romantic feelings for a woman. He looked at me and said, "That's okay. You can ask God for forgiveness... and now you know not to do that again."

I fear this experience is one many queer Catholics carry with them. Whether through direct comments, harmful policies, or outdated stanc-

es, we know we are not always welcome within the church. We know we do not have the same rights in the church. Beyond the church, we know there are a record number of anti-trans and anti-LGBTQ+ bills right now in the United States. And yet, we know there are many of us LGBTQ+ people who are not just attending our churches, but we are singing, decorating, reading, altar serving, and performing leadership roles.

For many of us younger queer Catholics, the outdated stance on LGBTQ+ issues within a church that claims to stand with those who are marginalized is confusing and disheartening. I experience and see the conflict that exists for those queer people who desire to stay in the Catholic faith. In fact, I often find that - in social settings - it is my Catholic identity I'm more likely to hide than my identity as a queer woman.

Most of my LGBTQ+ friends grew up with some faith tradition, but many do not practice anymore because of experiences of discrimination. They find other ways to be in community and to experience a sense of spirituality on their Sunday mornings -- whether by hosting a picnic in the park or by playing in the Sunday gay softball leagues.

I remember shortly after college, when I opened the bulletin and saw the church I was attending, St. Agnes, had an LGBTQ Ministry. I was shocked, but I felt welcomed, seen, and valued for who I am. I attended events held by the longstanding community of LGBTQ+ people, and I was grateful to see that I was part of a legacy of people within our communities living, advocating, and thriving.

Now I lead an LGBTQ Ministry at St. Agnes and have the joy of meeting new people who are seeking what I was seeking. I receive emails from younger queer Catholics in and outside San Francisco (even in other states and countries) who found our page. They often say things like, "Is my partner welcome?" "I didn't realize there was such a thing!" "I've contacted many places and never heard back. You're the first person who responded."

We respond to them with a big welcome, offer to connect them to other LGBTQ community members to talk about any questions they have, and host events to bring people together. We send out community emails that share events and opportunities to connect, including events with speakers like Sister Jeanine Gramick and Fr. James Martin. We celebrate Pride and even have a



Pride flag up in the church.

But our true community-building and connection comes at our LGBTQ Faith Sharing monthly gatherings and our social hour after mass. It's the simple things that bring us hope and joy: seeing each other; sharing our complex faith journeys and our journeys as queer people; praying, eating, laughing, singing, and celebrating each other together. This community building is what creates the foundation also to take steps to make larger changes.

I've recently been inspired by the wave of folks seeking a welcoming community at this time. As we navigate the complexity of the pandemic and all of the heaviness of our current world, I find people are searching for a space of loving welcome

and hope. Liz is an example:

"When I was a teen, I had come out to my family and friends and I was finally able to live my truth, but I still had that lingering feeling of something missing deep inside. As I got older, I realized I never spoke out loud about what my religious beliefs were. I didn't feel like I had anyone close to me or like me, that could guide me through that journey. I really wanted to develop a more spiritual connection to my experiences in life and bring God to the forefront. I did struggle with the idea of fully entering the Catholic Church because of their public stance on the LGBTQ community. However, my desire to know God and learn about the faith was still weighing on my heart.

Thanks to a Google search, I stumbled upon New Ways Ministry. I truly believe this was God calling me to walk with him. I searched for a Catholic parish with an LGBTQ Ministry in my area and I was immediately drawn to St. Agnes. It was such perfect timing when I found St. Agnes. I had every intention to take my journey slowly into the faith, but the RCIA sessions

were just about to start so I knew I had to jump at the opportunity."

We welcomed Liz into our community in April. The impact of creating a welcoming space to the LGBTQ+ community is immeasurable. I urge you to consider developing an LGBTQ Ministry where you are and to look up resources like New Ways Ministry and Fortunate Families. However, the first step can be just bringing people together.

Andrea serves as the Associate Director of the Public Service Center at U C Berkeley. She is passionate about supporting students as they work in their communities to advance social justice. She volunteers as LGBTQ Ministry Coordinator at St. Agnes Church in San Francisco. Andrea is proudly Jesuit educated, a graduate of the University of San Francisco (BA 2008) (MA 2013).





The word *Journey* is so appropriate in this context. Faith and building a personal relationship with God is a

lifetime journey; not a trophy or badge that you win at one point in time. That being said, a lot can happen in that journey and each person has a unique one. Let me give you a glimpse into mine.

It all starts with faith, right? If there is no faith then there is no journey to embark on. Although there are moments that I find myself doubting even the little faith I have, my need for God chases it all away. Faith in God is what we can say keeps me sane. My Catholic faith grounds me and represents the framework for my life. As I usually tell my friends, being Catholic is a lifestyle; it affects every aspect of my life.

Interestingly, I have not always thought of my faith in this way. Growing up in Benin (West Africa) till my late teenage years, I used to be what we commonly call in Benin, the "Sunday Catholics," people who go to Sunday masses but do not truly live as Catholic in their daily life. Through many events and by the grace of God, I later realized that being Catholic means more than just going to Sunday masses. In my early

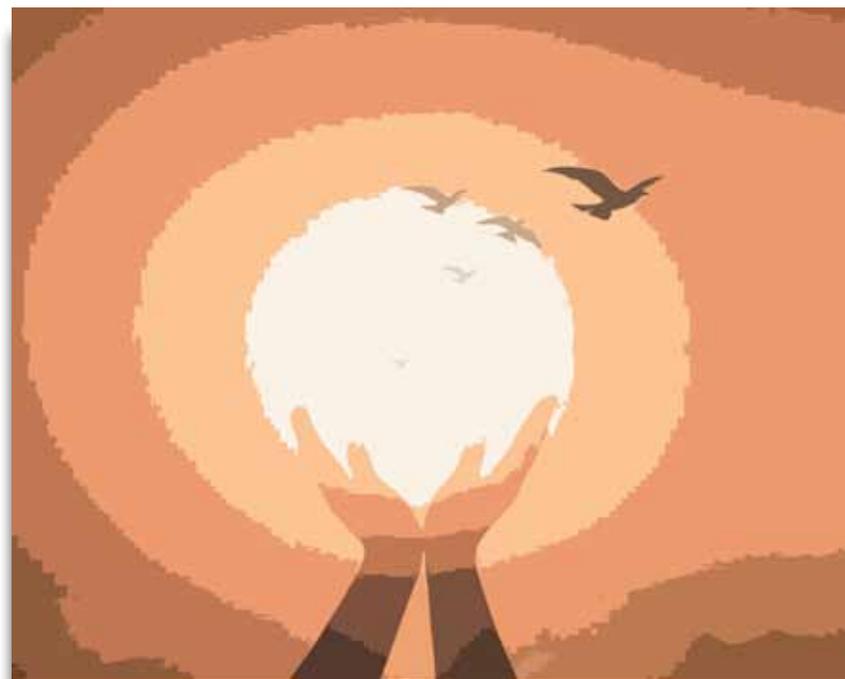
adulthood, I was not familiar with or not even aware of the Catholic social teachings which are an integral part of Catholicism. As I grow into adulthood, I have decided to fully embrace the Catholic faith and its teachings.

Having faith in God is good, but not sufficient. We can compare Faith to a plant; if you do not nourish it, it will eventually die. *How does one nourish his or her faith?* Well, there is no magic formula, but for me, it is something done at a personal level and community level. At a personal level, I strive for a better prayer life and scripture reading which is a continuous work in progress. As I find myself longing for a relationship, a true connection with God, I have started to reflect on how I can personally encounter God. One way I discovered, is through silence. I tend to have so much noise and distractions packed in my daily life, some healthy and some not. Silence allows me to listen and most importantly be in the presence of God. Though it is still challenging for me, I believe silent moments have real virtues. Something that also helps me is challenging my faith and the church's teachings. Trying to own my faith and understand the "why's" of the church's teachings has helped me consolidate my faith.

The community also plays an important role in faith. So far, I have lived in Africa, Europe, and North America. Besides the work of God on me, I credit most of my positive spiritual development to the structure of the Catholic community here in the U.S and to the online resources I have been exposed to. In none of the countries I have lived in before was I exposed to a dynamic Catholic church that wants you to be an active member, a part of it. I was familiar with the traditional ministry groups (lectors, choir singers, altar boys...) but not with groups such as young adult groups, married couples groups, mothers groups, etc... The diversity of these groups encourages parishioners to get involved and become active members of the church. The more I take part in faith-

related community activities the more enriched is my faith. Through online resources (videos, articles) I am continuously getting new insights from the Catholic social teachings and spiritual reflections that help me reflect and question where I am at. Our faith is not meant to be lived at a personal level only but also in communion with others. I believe it is important to support one another in our journeys and be living testimonies of Christ's teachings through our words and actions.

Born and raised in Benin (West Africa), Larissa currently lives in Chicago where she is pursuing a Ph.D. in Electrical Engineering. She is an advocate for gender equality and universal electricity access. She enjoys new food experiences and loves discovering new cultures.



A Young Adult's Journey with God and Faith | By Sergio Perez



I enter this space as I believe God intended me to—as a Catholic gay Latino man born of Mexican immigrants in the United States.

I am born of Mexican immigrants from the state of Coahuila, Mexico. My parents left their home country to give their families, and ultimately my brothers and me, opportunities they didn't have. They came to the United States undocumented and with no command of the English language, yet they made La Villita Chicago their home. My parents raised my brothers and me with a deep appreciation for our culture. We ate traditional foods like barbacoa and carnitas every Sunday after church; we celebrated our Catholic identity with images of Nuestra Señora, la Virgen de Guadalupe everywhere in our home; they told us *cuentos*, or stories of their lives in Mexico; they taught us the importance of family as we went to la *tiendita*, the corner store, to buy a five dollar phone card to call Mexico and talk to our *abuelitos*, *tios*, *tias*, and *primos*.



My journey with faith and God while growing up was shaped by what I encountered. I knew there was a reason why I was in the United States. I saw it daily as my father did back-breaking construction and cement work and my mother did stints at temporary staffing agencies or as a lunch lady in the elementary schools. I saw it when my parents sent money back to my family in Mexico so they had food to eat and a roof over their heads. I saw it when our family vacations were always trips to Mexico to visit my grandparents bringing them food, clothes, shoes, and life essentials. We had privilege in our family, and we were taught to use our privilege to bring stability, opportunity, and joy to others.

It is because of this life experience that I pay attention today when I see issues of poverty, migration, or refugees entering the United States. I understood early on that no one ever risks so much in leaving their



families and their homeland unless they see the possibility of breaking cycles of generational poverty. I was taught by my parents and family through their words and actions that I would find God at the margins if I paid attention.

My family shared everything we had; none of us was entitled to keep what we earned exclusively for ourselves. We knew we were the product of a community coming together that got us where we are today, and therefore had to give back to community in a meaningful way.

These are the lessons that inform my current journey with faith and God. As I encounter others, particularly those most different from me, I try to understand their story. I seek to understand how they got where they are today and accept their journey and needs as the journey and needs of God.

Today I work full time as a diversity educator at a Catholic college in the Midwest. In my work I've had the privilege of meeting students with stories like mine, but also with stories much different than my own. For example, the Black student who is the first in the family to go to college

and needs support navigating the higher education system so they can take the right courses and graduate on time; the undocumented student whose entire family is pitching in to pay for tuition and books; or LGBT community members who don't feel welcomed at their home church because of the lack of respect, compassion, and sensitivity given to them.

My journey with faith and God has been emboldened by all these stories. I learned that all faces—Latino, Black, undocumented, immigrant, Queer, disabled—are faces in the likeness of God. I've learned from my family that when I see this likeness, I must do more than welcome. I must provide and work with them until their innate human dignity is respected and they feel empowered to enter any space as they are, as God intended. This has and will continue to be my journey with faith and God, one informed by humans to better serve God and all of humanity.

Sergio Pérez (he/el) is a first generation Mexican-American Queer man born in Chicago, Illinois. He was born to parents from Coahuila, México. He holds a BA in Political Science and International Studies from Loras College and a M.S.Ed in Student Affairs Administration and Higher Education from the University of Wisconsin- La Crosse. He is currently working towards his doctorate degree in higher education and leadership studies from Edgewood College. Sergio is also involved with Iowa's League of United Latin American Citizens as the state's DEI committee Chair and Chaplain and serves on the National LULAC LGBT Affairs Committee.



From Misery to the Miraculous | By Shamyra Lavigne



Come with me through a review of my spiritual journey which took my life from misery to miraculous. Before I found my purpose in fighting for environmental justice in my Louisiana hometown, St. James, I was in what I call a “dark place.” A dark place is a state of mind that is the loneliest, yet most populated place. Although you go to the dark place alone, without anyone accompanying you, you quickly find yourself surrounded by your old familiar memories. Memories of past guilts, shame, regrets, and fears. Past negative memories that rerun in your mind, stealing your peace. In this

dark place, I found myself unhappy in my career, battling constant sadness, insomnia, and having no peace of mind. I couldn't understand why I felt so unhappy and unfulfilled. One night, lying in bed, unable to sleep, I questioned God, tearfully. I wondered why my life had come to this. I wondered ‘how did I get here?’ I knew something had to change, and that something was me.

That night, my journey officially began. I had no idea how to start, but I knew that God was with me, and I had just enough faith to take the first step. With God's guidance, online sermons of Pastor Michael Todd of Transformation Church, and my

good old-fashioned pen and notebook, I started writing. Day-by-day, I wrote in my journal. I wrote how I was feeling. I wrote what I no longer wanted to feel. I wrote all the past pain I had experienced since I could remember. One-by-one, I went through each past situation, forgiving anyone who had ever hurt me, and small miracles began to occur. As I released the past hurts and forgave others and myself, God began to overflow my life with grace, blessings, purpose, vision, success, joy, love, and the miracle of peace of mind. I did not realize how much I needed to release until I physically felt the weight lifting off of me and peace of mind returning.

I realized how much better I felt once I forgave each thing and released it. I realized how much past hurts had become too heavy for me to continue to carry. I remembered the ‘invisible backpack’ analogy I heard years prior. The analogy is that every person is born with an invisible backpack on their back that we carry with us throughout our life. Each offense we experience that we don't release, is like a boulder being added into our invisible backpack. For each past hurt, mistake, heartbreak, and disrespect that we hold onto, the boulder after boulder is added to our backpack. I learned that I was trying to move forward into the future with the weight of the past weighing me down.

All those past hurts I was knowingly and unknowingly holding onto were weighing me down and keeping me

from living a fulfilled life of peace and purpose. My life began to brighten up, like a lamp on a lampstand, permeating the dark place. My nights began to be peaceful. I began to climb in bed at night, without the same old racing thoughts stealing my peace. I found myself waking up with joy and optimism, I began to hear people tell me that I was ‘glowing.’

With faith, courage, and trust in God, I released the career that was no longer serving me. In 2020, I was led into the most important fight of my lifetime: environmental justice in my hometown—a journey that has brought me all over the world, from Dubai to Scotland, and many places in-between. Alongside my incredible mom, I am honored to thrive in my divine purpose, standing in solidarity with my community and supporters from all around the world against the toxic pollution of the water, land, and air by billion-dollar petrochemical industries systemically built in impoverished Black communities¹

Shamyra Lavigne, Certified Life Coach specializing in mental wellness, is a native of St. James, Louisiana and the Executive Assistant at RISE St. James. In 2020, she stepped into her excellence, fighting on the front lines against billion dollar petrochemical industries, demanding environmental justice for impoverished Black and Brown districts disproportionately impacted by petrochemical emissions and toxins in St. James Parish. She has made it her mission to bring attention to the mental health impacts of petrochemical industry emissions.



It can be a challenge finding God’s presence in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, immigration and human rights issues, and negative political rhetoric when one’s own family and community are dealing with the harsh realities of loneliness, depression, lack of access to mental health care, and financial hardships.

But in the midst of difficulties, the presence of God in my life and in the life of my own community is revealed. In my experience as a Latino, I find that the values of “la familia,” “la comunidad,” and “la fe y devociones populares” help me find God’s presence in my personal life and that of the community.

In the Latino community we experience hardships as a family and what affects one affects all of us. It is this dynamic that provides us with an opportunity to be resilient. I cannot imagine going through the most difficult times of my life without my family, who provide a support system emotionally, financially, and spiritually. It is in this dynamic of family/community that miracles happen as we take care of one another by prayer and financial sup-

port. The family, without a doubt, has been the place of revelation of God in my life. It is the place where I have been able to experience care, love, and mercy as my family accompanied me in the darkest moments of my life.

The other source of hope is community, which is part of the extended family. In this space where my life experiences are recognized and acknowledged, I can feel authentically accepted, encouraged, and uplifted.

As we as Church look for opportunities to serve young Latinos, we need to keep in mind the intention of creating spaces of authentic encounters where young people can experience a real sense of extended family. And finally, we should always remember Pope Francis’s invitation to make the Church “a place of mercy freely given, where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel.”¹

In addition, as an immigrant member of the Church, I would like to share an observation. For a long time, the Church has talked about being welcoming. We need to stop welcoming people with the pre-



sumption that they are in a place that is not theirs. For example, “I welcome you to my house, to my party.” It is about time we let young people know they already belong; we cannot continue to treat them as outsiders when they are also owners of the house. A transformative experience in my faith life has been the realization that, although sometimes I have felt unwelcomed in this country as an immigrant, I know I belong in the Church. How can we help other young people feel the same way?

To conclude, we have much to learn from the story Our Lady of Guadalupe’s apparition to San Juan Diego. The narration of the Nican Mopohua

describes how Our Lady of Guadalupe goes out to encounter San Juan Diego on his own journey. Today, as a large number of young Latinos disaffiliate from the Church, it is time for the Church to go out and encounter them on their journeys. As Our Lady encounters Juan Diego, she recognizes him as a beloved son, speaks to him in his own language and sends him on a mission “go and see the bishop.” In our times, we must make an effort to ensure that young Latinos feel loved and understood, and we cannot be afraid to speak their language and invite them to be part of the mission of the Church. Today many young Latinos are responding to the call just as Juan Diego did, but they feel stuck at the periphery. How can we embrace them and invite them to feel at home?

Vicente immigrated to Chicago from Zacatecas, Mexico with his family at age 15, experiencing firsthand the struggles and challenges young immigrants face, including being undocumented. After college, Vicente became a community organizer working to pass the Illinois state law allowing undocumented immigrants to obtain drivers licenses. Vicente became a DACA recipient in 2012, allowing him to more fully integrate and contribute to this country. At the age of 20 Vicente founded Iskali, a nonprofit organization that exists to empower and equip young Latinos to become transformative leaders.

1. Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Holy Father Francis, #114.

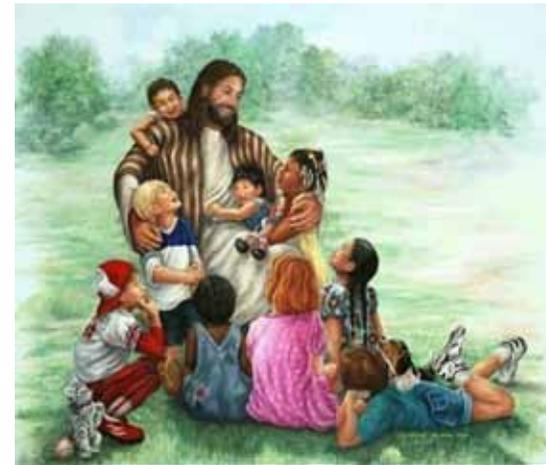


Faith can be defined as the complete trust or confidence in something or someone. It can also be defined as a strong belief in God or religion based on spiritual understanding. However, we know that faith is much more than that. Faith is an ongoing journey that requires sacrifice, love, trust, hard work, forgiveness, mercy, perseverance, and grace. It is not always complete trust or complete confidence. After all, we are human. We are not perfect. We fail, we doubt, we sin, and we aim for this complete trust and confidence, but we fall short. God's plan is not always the easiest to accept. My faith is the core of who I am... at least I try my best to aim for that. It is a constant roller coaster full of ups and downs. My faith affects everything in my life whether that be within relationships, work, or home. It all boils down to trusting in God and His plan, which is always more

easily said than done! So, what does my faith mean to me?

My faith affects every aspect of my life, especially my work life. I am a first year teacher teaching fifth grade at a Catholic school. Fifth graders are not always the easiest to work with. The sassiness, attitudes, and changing hormones are constant in my classroom. School after the pandemic has not exactly been a walk in the park. However, I love my students with all my heart, and I would do anything to help them succeed in school, faith, and their personal life. Teaching at a Catholic school allows me to be completely myself. I know that Catholic school teachers do not get paid nearly as much compared to teachers at a public school. However, money is not everything. I hear so many people my age talking about their job and how well it pays, but they constantly complain about how they hate it. I even hear my fifth graders saying they want to be doctors solely because

doctors get paid a lot. This breaks me. In today's society, many are focused on money, and fewer focused on living faithful, happy lives doing a job they enjoy. Again, I am not perfect, and I fall short every time, but I love being able to



completely share myself and my passions with my students. This is just another reason why my faith means everything to me. I love sharing my faith and openly talking about our amazing God with my students, co-workers, and other staff members.

Being rooted in faith means being called to love others. God calls us to love our neighbor and our enemies. Living out this part of our faith can be difficult at times and even exhausting. But as we know, Jesus loved all people no matter their journey or their past. When it comes to the relationships in my life, I always try to approach them with love and remember that God loves them, too. I love the saying, "What would Jesus do? He would love first." You may be thinking, easier said than done, and I know! As I have said many times before, we are not perfect, and we fall over and over again. What truly matters is that we are trying! We get right back up, maybe hit confession on the way, and try again! When it

comes to faith in relationships, I simply try my best.

The most important thing to remember about faith is that we are children of God. God created us for a purpose. We are on this Earth at this exact moment in time for a specific reason. We were not an accident. God formed us in the womb and made us good. Lately, I have been

struggling with the thought of not being enough for the people in my life, and even God. I know this is a lie sent from the evil one to make me believe I am not doing enough or being enough. However, this thought creeps into my mind over and over, especially when I fall short. My faith is the core of who I am, but that does not stop negative thoughts from coming in. I know I need to lean on God and draw strength from him because I can't do it alone. None of us can. We need him more than we know. Let us always remember that each one of us is "enough" because we are created by God.

Abby is a fifth grade teacher at a Catholic elementary school in Dubuque, IA. She is a recent graduate of Loras College where she was involved in the Spiritual Life Community, and served as the Community Life Coordinator. In her spare time she loves to spend time with friends and family, watch movies, bake, hike, travel, and enjoy the outdoors.



When reflecting on my life up to this point, it is obvious to me that I am not a “self-made” man. My journey with God has been shaped and influenced first of all by the Holy Spirit, and also by a cloud of witnesses, both on earth and in heaven, who have guided and formed me to be a committed disciple of Christ.

I owe my faith first of all to my parents. Right from when I was in my mother’s womb, my parents prayed over me and dedicated me to God. From my childhood, they helped me learn to give God the absolute priority in my life. We prayed together as a family every day, went to Mass together at least every Sunday, participated in other parish events, and so on. They would often teach my brothers and me about God either through the Bible or through cartoon programs like Super Book. All their endeavors helped me to learn to love and trust God. One of my favorite childhood memories was me gathering the entire household in the evenings so that I could “celebrate”

Mass. Even though I was only about six or seven years old, I was enamored by the Mass and wanted to imitate what the priest was doing on the altar. Little did I know back then that I would eventually discern a call to religious life and the priesthood. To this day, whenever the family is together, we always pray.

A second influence on me is my devotion to Our Blessed Mother Mary. When I was seventeen years old, I made an act of total consecration of myself to Mary. Since that time, my devotion to Our Lady has helped me have an even deeper love for God. This devotion has helped me make myself available to God. Prior to this consecration, my prayers were often for things that I needed (or wanted) or things that other people wanted. This devotion has expanded and deepened my spiritual life and has helped me pray that I may be willing



to follow the Lord, to be open to His will, to give of myself to Jesus who gives his whole self to me in Holy Communion. In other words, I love God, not because of what God does for me or those I love, but primarily because God is good and deserving of my love. I believe that this is a direct consequence of my Marian devotion. It has also given me a deeper devotion to the Holy Spirit and a desire to bear the fruits of the Spirit in my life.

Another huge influence on my journey with God was the Catholic student community at Baylor University. While I was an undergraduate, I met a number of students who were very committed to God and were able to maintain a solid relationship with God while also studying and navigating the other necessities of life. This had an influence on me and inspired me to draw nearer to God. We would often study together, volunteer together to serve the poorer people in the city, go to daily Mass together, and so on. These friendships helped me see God in all things and to find ways to glorify God in all my activities. I was also a member of the Legion of Mary while at Baylor and

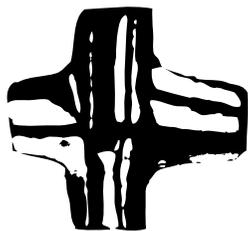


together we went to visit the elderly in hospice centers so as to pray with them and keep them company as they prepared for their final journey to God. We would also meet weekly to pray and encourage one another in our Christian discipleship. All these activities were formative for me and have helped form me to be the young man that I am today.

In conclusion, I am grateful to God for all those that he put along my path in life, and I look forward to what God will do in my life in the future.

Brother Raphael was born in Los Angeles, CA, spent his childhood in Nigeria, and returned to the U.S. for college. He is currently a grad student at Catholic Theological Union and a Franciscan preparing for ordination.





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